

## Acts 9:1-25 A Surprising Conversion

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In his book 'The 100' Michael Hart has the nerve to select what he things are the most influential people in history. People like Einstein, Napoleon, Hitler. The Apostle Paul makes it into the 100 and is placed at number 6. He says after Jesus he has been the most influential Christian. He caused Christianity to move from being a Jewish sect to a world religion.

Today we come to look at where this all began.

We have already been introduced to Saul at the stoning of Stephen. He was there giving approval. We know what is attitude to Jesus is. One of hatred and opposition.

Here we learn about not only his conversion but also his commissioning.

Jesus turning him around and giving him a job.

Luke records this 3 times in Acts. WHY? Because Paul plays a key role in the unstoppable message going from Jerusalem to the rest of the world.

### 1. State: The Surprising Conversion

#### Read: 1

**Who is this man?** A religious man. The religious of the religious. Raised in the right religious home in a religious family. He went to the best religious school. He sat under the best religious teacher. He was zealous for Judaism. And so he was zealous against anything that stood opposed to that. He gave himself to destroying this new movement. So we find him **'breathing out murderous threats'**.

And he had a plan. 1b-2 He was a man consumed with one passion, namely, to eradicate followers of Jesus from the earth. It was not enough that he had broken up the Jerusalem church after Stephen's death. Now he wanted to go to Damascus to find any followers of Christ so that he could bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Listen to his own words in 26:9-11

Actually he says 'in raging fury' I did this.

Saul was not a likely candidate for salvation. As much as Osama Bin Laden would be. Saul is heartless in his cruelty. He was after both men and women. He didn't care if he took fathers and mothers away from their children. He had such an intense hatred for Jesus Christ and His followers that he felt that any suffering he inflicted on them was right.

Saul was converted. Look at v.11 where we see him praying.

Read vv.17-18

Here we see other indicators that he has become a Christian.

**John Newton** - Newton often openly mocked the captain by creating obscene poems and songs about him that became so popular the crew began to join in. He entered into disagreements with several colleagues which resulted in his being nearly starved to death, imprisoned while at sea and chained like the slaves

Newton gained notoriety for being one of the most profane men the captain had ever met. In a culture where sailors commonly used oaths and swore, Newton was admonished several times for not only using the worst words the captain had ever heard, but creating new ones to exceed the limits of verbal debauchery.

He was turned around by Jesus and went on to write the hymn 'Amazing Grace.'

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind but now I see

He was a slave trader but Newton joined forces with a young man named William Wilberforce, the British Member of Parliament who led the Parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire

In the conversion of Saul we see is that religion won't save us. The hardest part about believing the Gospel of Jesus is admitting that you are wrong. Even in your religion you are wrong. It is wrong to think that you can make it to God by your religion or anything you can do. Otherwise why did God send his Son Jesus to die?

So what God wants us to see in this conversion is that the most unlikely people can be converted and are converted. God's mercy and power are not limited to people who have been set up for Christianity by a good family or a church background or a clean moral life. The chief of sinners was converted. Doesn't this give us hope for those who look like they would ever turn to Jesus? He was not "ripe for the picking" as we like to say. He was way beyond picking. He was hard and dry and shriveled up. What happened to Paul was sudden and utterly unexpected, and that means the same can happen for others. We should keep praying and keep speaking the truth in love.

But you maybe someone who is like Paul in your attitude to Jesus even in maybe thinking that you're religion will save you. Or you may not see your need for salvation in Jesus. You may be a nice person but be wrong about the most important thing in life – JESUS.

### **Saul is converted. He is changed. How?**

#### **2. By God's grace**

##### **Read: 3-9**

Look where we see God's work here.

First, God causes a light to flash from heaven with blinding brightness. V.3 It left Paul blind for three days.

Second, notice that the voice that speaks to Paul from heaven does not ask for Paul's free decision to believe in Jesus; it tells him exactly what he is to do. Verse 5b–6. Jesus is seen here as having total authority. He wants Paul in his service and there is no question but that he will succeed.

Third how Paul describes his own conversion

Philippians 3:12 – 'I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me'. 'took hold of'.

In a big wave wipeout, a breaking wave can push surfers down 20 to 50 feet (6.2 m to 15.5 m) below the surface. Once they stop spinning around, they have to quickly regain their equilibrium and figure out which way is up. Surfers may have less than 20 seconds to get to the surface before the next wave hits them. The water pressure at a depth of 20-50 feet can be strong enough to rupture one's eardrums. Strong currents and water action at those depths can also slam a surfer into a reef or even the floor, which can result in severe injuries or even death.

The waves take hold of surfers and do want they want with them. So Jesus has taken hold of Saul. See what immediate impact this had on Saul. v.4 Fell to the ground. v.9 This is a result of the intensity of his meeting with Jesus. God brought him down Jesus arrested him before he had the chance to arrest any Christians. Saul didn't decide for Christ. It was Christ who decided for him.

He expected to walk into Damascus in his pride and arrogance opposing Jesus was led into it crushed, humbled and blinded, a captive of Jesus who he opposed.

There was no human explanation for Saul's conversion! There is no human explanation for any true conversion, because salvation is from the Lord, not from man. God is able to do what we cannot imagine. Jesus had turned him around to face the opposite direction.

**C.S Lewis in his autobiography Surprised by Joy talks about sensing God's relentless pursuit of him like the great Angler playing his fish, to a cat chasing a mouse, to a pack of hounds closing in on a fox and to the divine chess player move him into positions until he concedes checkmate.**

We often think that Jesus won't force himself on you. He is the perfect gentleman. The passage is saying if you are chosen by Jesus he is going to get you even if he has to knock you on your back. There is no point resisting him. There was no long process. The conversion was sudden and utterly unexpected.  
So it is clear that this conversion is a work of God's grace.

### **3. For us**

**Read: 15-16**

**This is not only about Paul's conversion but also his COMMISSIONING.**

**The Pharasaic persecutor of Christians becomes the Christian preacher.** The arch enemy of Christ becomes the great advocate for Christ. He is 'my chosen instrument' Jesus says. He has a special role to play. As the Apostle to the Gentiles. This begins straight away.

See vv.19b-20

So that we might hear the Gospel message of the resurrected Jesus.

The most crucial event of history, for which Jesus lived, died and was resurrected and glorified was to bring people to death to life. The second most strategic event was the conversion and commissioning of Saul. "Paul more than any other man, was responsible for the transformation of Christianity from a Jewish sect into a world religion." Michael Hart

Also so that we might so the suffering that is the very means by which we come to hear that message. The persecutor will become the persecuted. He suffers like Jesus as he bears his name. Both in speaking about what he has seen and heard and in his lifestyle.

This begins straight away.

See v.23, 29

**Read 2 Corinthians 11:24-27**

**The conversion and commissioning of Saul is like the drop in the pond that causes the ripples to go out.**

Paul is the drop and so the unstoppable message of Jesus ripples out to the ends of the earth beyond the Jews and to the Gentiles.

We hear this message as a direct result of this event.

This event that was God's work. God's plan. The risen Jesus revealed himself to Saul so that he was converted. The risen Jesus with authority commission Saul to go and he went.